

Wh-(equivalent) questions for eliciting new information: A discourse analytical approach to Japanese male first meetings

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Abstract

This discourse-analytical study focused on wh-(equivalent) questions posed in first-encounter conversations among Japanese males. Five conversations between three Japanese males totaling approximately 150 minutes were analyzed. The participants were instructed to conduct 30 minutes of first-time conversations with new acquaintances. Utterances with question forms serving the function of eliciting new information from the question recipient were extracted and analyzed. Of the 204 questions found in the data, only 25 questions used wh-words. Rather, the participants tended to ask about simple things that were not related to the personal information of the other participants. It was found that when they did ask the other participants about personal matters using wh-(equivalent) questions, the askers used hedge words in pre-sequences and post-sequences that contained excuses, apologies, and explanations for asking. The questions were generally analyzed at the sentence-level; however, the behavior of asking questions should be analyzed beyond the sentence level.

1. Introduction

This paper attempts to shed light on the discourse patterns of eliciting information in first-encounter conversations between male interlocutors in Japanese. This discourse-analytical study is based on the quantitative study of question-answer sequences in male first meetings (Shigemitsu, 2017). Five Japanese conversations that were video-taped and audio-recorded between unacquainted people were analyzed. The total length of the recorded data is approximately 150 minutes. All the participants were male. The participants were instructed to engage in a 30-minute conversation with a new acquaintance.

For the analysis, the framework of discourse politeness established by Usami (2002) was used. Usami argued that “in addition to sentence-level politeness of linguistic forms, discourse-level phenomena -- such as prefacing before making a request or ways and/or appropriate frequencies of backchanneling – play an important role in pragmatic politeness (p. 4),” and she “introduce(s) the concept of “discourse politeness” in the belief that it also plays an important role in pragmatic politeness (p.4).” According to her, “discourse politeness is defined as “the dynamic whole of functions of various elements in both linguistic forms and discourse-level phenomena that play a part within the pragmatic politeness of a discourse (p.4).” Her framework can be applied to question-answer sequences. First, a set of question-answer sequences is already beyond utterance-level phenomena. Second, both questions and answers are sometimes organized with several utterances of prefacing, such as conveying the reasons for asking.

This paper concerns speaking activity in natural conversations. Speaking activity can be divided into four categories. Figure 1 displays the four categories of speaking activity, taken from Ozaki, Tsubaki, and Nakai (2010, p. 5). (The author translated the figure into English and added the numbers.) According to Ozaki, Tsubaki, and Nakai (2010), speaking behavior can be divided into two main categories: [1] monologues and interactions with others. Interactions with others can be further categorized into: [2] certain situations such as interviews, discussions, and meetings, which have specific reasons for the participants to interact with others, and conversations. Conversations can be further divided into the following two sub-categories: [3] conversations with certain purposes such as requesting, greeting, offering, thanking, etc., and [4] conversations without any specific purposes. Social conversations, in this paper, refers to those conversations held for the purpose of creating and maintaining relationships. This category includes verbal behaviors such as chatting, small talk, etc. These behaviors are characterized as just talking to someone to spend some time together. This study focuses on the verbal behavior in category [4], as shown in Figure 1.

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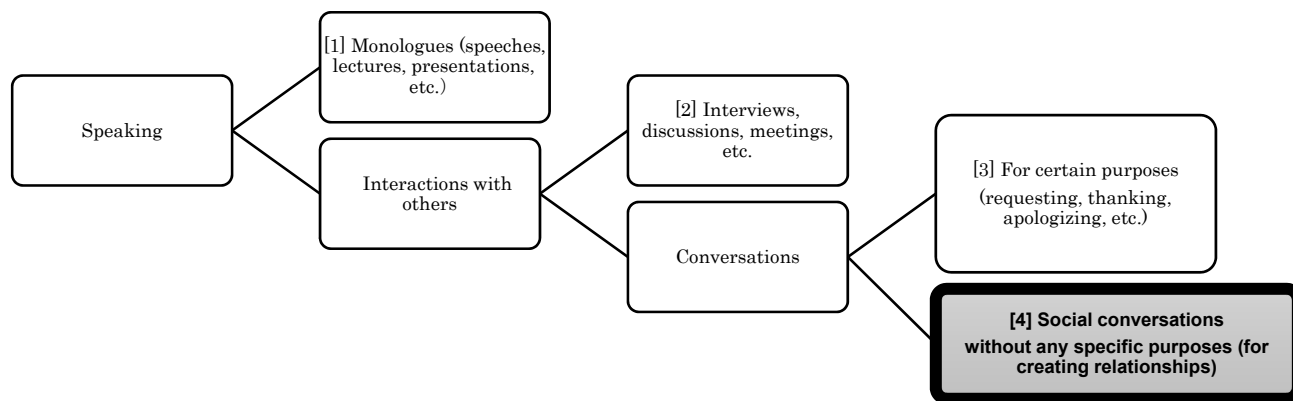


Figure 1. The four categories of speaking activities.

2. Previous studies

2.1 Summary of the quantitative study by Shigemitsu (2017a)

The present qualitative study is based on the quantitative study of Shigemitsu (2017a). Shigemitsu (2017a) analyzed utterances with different question forms and questions that elicit new information from the recipient, and compared question usage between English and Japanese speakers. According to her data analysis, 1) the English speakers used wh-questions as well as yes/no questions, whereas the Japanese speakers used more yes/no questions than wh-questions (one-third); and 2) the English speakers asked more about personal information pertaining to the question recipient than other topics, whereas the Japanese speakers preferred to ask about topics that were not related directly to the question recipient. Shigemitsu compared question forms and functions in first-encounter conversations between unacquainted people in 15 English conversations and five Japanese conversations. Utterances with question forms and questions that elicited new information from the recipient were extracted and analyzed.

The questions were also divided into two categories: questions about the participant (private) and questions about other topics (public). The English participants asked more private questions to the question recipients. On the other hand, the Japanese data showed that public questions were asked more often than private questions in Japanese conversations.

Although follow-up interviews revealed that the Japanese participants felt that asking a private question in a first-encounter conversation was impolite, there was no conclusive result to show that English speakers ask more private questions and Japanese speakers avoid asking private questions. Rather, the Japanese participants asked questions more often than the English speakers, as mentioned above. The participants said that the questions they try to avoid are wh-questions and private questions about the question recipient. When the Japanese participants asked about a private matter or when they used open-ended questions, they would usually show hesitation before asking and apologize after for asking the question.

2.2 Eliciting new information on discourse-level phenomena

When someone wants to elicit new information, they usually use questions. Ilie (2015) highlighted that questions are represent the desire to acquire knowledge and drive a conversation, and “no real communication can take place without questions” (1). Goody (1978) pointed out that questions are considered to be a powerful communication tool because they have a particularly strong illocutionary force because they ‘compel’ a response. However, the behavior of asking questions is often controlled by the norms of the socio-cultural background of the language. For example, Shigemitsu (2015) reported that many Japanese people believe that asking questions is an impolite behavior. Several participants also claimed that asking detailed questions about personal opinions and ideas is considered to be impolite behavior. It has been observed that in Japan, students in the classroom setting or participants in meetings do not ask questions very often.

However, Shigemitsu (2017a, 2017b) pointed out that Japanese people use more questions compared to the three English-speaking countries (UK, USA, Australia) investigated in her study. Although the Japanese participants said that asking questions was not a polite behavior and that they did not like to be questioned in conversations, in the conversations in her study, they asked more questions than the English participants. Thus, their awareness of their own cultural values and their unconscious verbal behaviors were contradictory. It has been observed that the way in which one asks a question in Japanese requires some manipulation to avoid offending the question recipient. However, it has

been stated that such manipulation cannot be observed by the analysis of sentence-level forms of questions. It should “consider the entire discourse” (Usami, 2003, p. 2). Questions serve more functions than simply that of eliciting information. The three principal aspects of questioning are as follows:

- (a) Eliciting information: The main role of asking questions is to elicit information from other people.
- (b) Continuing conversation: By asking a question, we can continue a conversation because a question generally requires another person to respond. Therefore, a question functions for the continuation of a conversation.
- (c) Politeness: A question also plays an important role in politeness. The action of asking is strongly influenced by a person’s sociocultural background.

The research question in this paper is thus: How do the Japanese participants manipulate the way of eliciting information?

3 Methodology

3.1 Data

The Japanese data for this study are the same as those used in Shigemitsu (2017a, b), which were recorded in Japan in 2009 and 2012. Each set of data contains a 30-minute first-encounter conversation among the three male participants.

Table 1. The conversation data for analysis

Language	Place of data collection	Data code	Participant code
Japanese	Tokyo	JP17	J24, J25, J26
		JP68	J37, J42, J43
		JP71	J36, J37, J39
		JP72	J33, J38, J39
		JP73	J33, J35, J39

All the participants met the following criteria:

1. None of the participants had met each other previously. We assumed that the participants would try not to receive a negative evaluation from the other participants.
2. The participants were all men. We examined only men to eliminate gender variables, and because Japanese people who face problems in intercultural communication are generally businessmen.
3. The participants were aged 22 and older. Most were Ph.D. and M.A. students. We assumed that the participants of this age group would be socially and culturally mature and that their behavior would be influenced by their sociocultural background.
4. All the participants’ ancestral backgrounds were checked, and they were not recent immigrants.
5. All the participants in the study signed a consent form stating that the researchers could use the recording data for academic purposes only and that it would not be used in a manner that would allow personal identification.

Since this was a first-encounter conversation, some features that are distinct from ordinary conversations were observed. First, the participants introduced themselves at the beginning of the conversation. Then, they began exchanging their background information, their likes and dislikes, and a report of facts and opinions that they thought would interest their listeners. In the introductory conversation, the participants tried to present their best personality traits and be polite. Since the first exchange represents an opportunity for the development of a long-term relationship, they aimed to succeed at relationship building. For that reason, the data tend to show an ideal conversation, as visualized by the participants.

3.2 Typology of questions for the research

This study examined discourse-level questions that elicit information that the asker does not know, or answers to questions offered by the recipient that the asker needed to clarify. Discourse-level questions should contain the core linguistic features of questions. The following question features were selected for analysis:

1. A question is an utterance that requires some information or judgment of the proposition.
2. Utterances typically have syntactic and prosodic features.

3. Certain utterances that do not have syntactic and prosodic features are included when the utterance concerned B event (Labov & Fanshell, 1977).

4. Certain utterances that do not have syntactic and prosodic features are included when the asker mentions that he lacks some information.

The following question forms were excluded from this research because they do not elicit information: the directive use of questions; questions in quotations; questions as filler, such as “What should I say?”; greetings with question forms, such as “How is it going?”; phrases confirming a person’s understanding, such as “Do you know what I mean?”; tag questions with falling intonations; and newsmarks without responses.

The categorization for Japanese conversation follows the studies of Hayashi (2010), Adachi (1999), and Tanaka (2015). Each Japanese final particle has slightly different connotations; however, they are classified using the same categorization as in English.

The question forms for eliciting information were divided into three categories for the present study: yes/no questions, wh-questions, and others.

1) Yes/no questions: A polar question is one of two question prototypes. It is used to determine whether the proposition is true or false in the question form.

2) Wh-questions: A content question is the other question prototype, and is used to elicit information.

3) Others:

- a) Alternative questions: This is used for selecting a candidate answer. However, half of these forms are the “A or something” type of alternative questions. It is regarded functionally as a content question.
- b) Questions for turn distribution: The main purpose of this question is to give a turn to the other participant, as in “What about you?”
- c) Disclaiming knowledge: Disclaiming knowledge informs the asker of the question recipient’s lack of knowledge. However, he or she does not insist on obtaining the answer from the other participant (e.g., “I’m not sure about that” or “I’m not familiar with that”).
- d) Co-construction question: While a speaker is talking, sometimes the final part of his utterance is uttered by the other participant with rising intonation. The participant is guessing and asking about it.
- e) Questions with “*do* (pronounce as in doe)” in Japanese: The word literally means “how,” but the required answer is not about the way of doing something. The whole story of an event is required. It typically means “Tell me about that” in a vague way.

The question forms for this study are summarized in Table 2. Syntactically, question markers appear at the beginnings of sentences in English and at the ends of sentences in Japanese. A Japanese question has a very different syntactic construction than English question forms. Tanaka (2015) acknowledged the extreme complexity of Japanese questions with their many aspects, such as politeness, gender differences, formal-informal, and with or without shared knowledge, which are interwoven in their production. The categorization below follows Tanaka (2015).

Table 2. Japanese question forms selected for this study

Polar questions	Open-ended questions	
Yes/No	Wh	others
<i>desu ka</i>	Wh equivalent+ <i>masu ka</i> / wh equivalent+ <i>mashita ka</i>	(*)unfinished
* <i>n desu ka</i>	wh equivalent+ <i>desu ka</i>	<i>do+shite masu ka</i>
* <i>wake desu ka</i>	*wh equivalent+; <i>n desu ka</i>	<i>do+deshita ka</i> with rising intonation
<i>masu ka/ mashita ka</i>	*wh equivalent+ <i>desu</i> rising intonation	<i>do+desu ka</i> with rising intonation
<i>masu/ mashita/</i> with rising intonation	wh equivalent short Q with rising intonation	(*) <i>kanji desu ka</i> with rising intonation
(*)no with rising intonation		<i>do nan desu ka ne</i>
*negative+ <i>desu ka</i>		*co-construction
*negative+ <i>n desu ka</i>		<i>wakarimasen</i> (I don't know)
* <i>yo ne</i> with rising intonation		<i>ke</i> (I should know about it but I do not know/remember)
* <i>desu ne</i>		
* <i>desu ka ne</i> with rising intonation		
short question		
*short Q with negative final particle		

Note. * indicates the question forms that were used when the asker could guess the content of ongoing information and ask about it.

4 Findings and discussion

4.1 Overview of wh-questions in Japanese data

According to Shigemitsu (2017b), 46% of the total questions asked by the English speakers were wh-questions. In contrast, 12% of the question forms in the data of the Japanese participants were wh (equivalent)-questions. The English speakers used various question words, such as questions beginning with “what,” “what kind,” “who,” “when,” “where,” “which,” “how,” “how old,” “how many/how much,” “how long,” “how far,” “why,” and “how come.” On the contrary, the Japanese data did not have such a variety. The Japanese speakers used “what,” “when,” “where,” “which,” “how,” and “why.” It was found that the Japanese participants tended to rely more on yes/no questions. As Ilie (2015) pointed out, wh-questions are open-ended questions. The length and depth of an open-ended answer are subject to the question recipients. In contrast, yes/no questions require an answer of either “yes” or “no.” The question recipients do not feel overwhelmed, compared with answering open-ended questions. When we look at wh-questions in Japanese, we should pay attention to their final particles. There are two types of final particles: ‘*n desu ka*’ and ‘*desu ka*.’ The short sound of ‘*n*’ creates a different connotation. According to Tanaka (2017), ‘*n desu ka*’ implies some common ground in relation to the situation, with the asker and question recipient sharing the same information and feelings, making the relationship between the interlocutors friendlier.

4.2 Discourse-level questions

The number of wh (equivalent)-questions was minimal in the data of the Japanese speakers. There were only 25 sentences with wh (equivalent) -words out of the 204 questions uttered by the Japanese participants. Excerpts (1), (2), and (3) were uttered without any pre-sequences or post-sequences. This is because the topic of the question did not relate to the personal information of the question recipient and the asker was trying to clarify some words that were not familiar to him. In (1), J37, J42, and J43 were talking about their research at their graduate school. J37 was explaining his study related to developmental linguistics. Both J37 and J42 were pragmatics majors. They talked about the well-

known American developmental and comparative psychologist, Tomasello. J43 was a technology major and was not familiar with the name. Thus, he asked about the meaning of several proper nouns. All examples were translated literally by the author.

(1) [JP68]

J43: What is Tomasello? (JP68)

In excerpt (2), J36 talked about potassium phosphate. J37 was not familiar with the term, so he asked J36 about it.

(2) [JP71]

J37: What is potassium phosphate?

In (3), J24, J25, and J26, science major students, were talking about their experiments. J24 asked a question to J25, who had conducted some experiments on sound.

(3) [JP17]

J24: How much data can you get when you measure it for 10 seconds with 44.1kHz?

As demonstrated by the above examples, a question that is not related to someone's personal matters can be asked without pre-sequences and post-sequences. Although the total number of such questions was low in the data, asking a wh-question is considered appropriate when one is asking about non-personal matters.

The next examples show that asking about personal matters with wh-questions seems to be inappropriate. Both excerpts (4) and (5) display questions about the question recipient's major in university. Excerpt (4) contains hedge expressions such as "around" and "area" and avoided the use of the pronoun "you." Excerpt (5) has post-sequences to show that the asker's intention was not harmful. In the original Japanese version, excerpt (4) does not contain the phrase "you belong to." The author added this phrase to clarify which department J24 was talking about.

(4)[JP17]

J24: In which area is the department (you belong to) based?

(5)[JP72]

J33: What is the goal of the research area? Ah, I am not trying to pry (laughing). I do not have any particular reason for asking this question. (JP72)

The next excerpts ([6] – [8]) both contain pre-sequences and post-sequences. In (6), before asking the question, there is a pause of 1.1 seconds. This pause demonstrates J37's hesitation to ask the question. What he was going to ask was "Do you know Professor Sxxx and Txxx, specialists in social informatics?" The number in the parentheses shows the length of the pause. The hesitation device "well" is also seen in the excerpt. J37 hesitates to ask the question. In line 1, he says "I may be wrong." He was afraid that J36 would think his question was inappropriate. J37 continues talking about his former topic, stating that the two professors from J36's university also teach at his (J37's) university. He explains the background situation first. In line 8, J37 asks "Do you know them?" However, he continues by saying, "You don't know them?" as if he is afraid that J36 would refuse to answer the question. J37 hoped that the two professors might be their common acquaintances. However, the possibility was small.

(6) [Excerpt from JP71] (literal translation)

(1)

01 J37: ko (.) data processing (.) laboratory ↑ (.) Uh so well, well, I may be wrong, Well...

02 J36: Ah, there is one. Something like that.

03 J37: Well, social informatics...

04 J36: Yes (.)

05 J37: There (.) Some often (.) very (.) professors I meet at conferences (.)

- 06 J36: huun↑
 07 J37: Some of them teach at our graduate school (.) Someone who is Professor Sxxxx (.) nd then,
 08 Professor Txxxx (.) do (.)Do you know them ↑ (.) You don't know them ?
 09 J36: They are on a different campus. Sociology...
 10 J37: I know. They are in Sagamihara.
 11 J36: I...
 12 J37: Yes, you don't know them, do you ?

The following excerpt shows how a Japanese participant hesitated to ask about a private matter or for confirmation of the question recipients' understanding of his idea. In this excerpt, J43, a technology major, was asking two other participants, a linguistic major and a language communication major, about the reasons why they wanted to study linguistics and communication. J43's real question appears in line 20: "What motivates you to conduct research?" However, we could see a long pre-sequence and J43's hesitation prior to the question in line 20. He stated his field of study. Then, he said, "I don't mean it. I am not insulting you" (line 8). After that, he gave some examples related to his field, technology. Then he added, "I am afraid this might be very impolite." After asking the question "What motivates you to do your current research," he explained that he was asking out of curiosity.

(7) [Excerpt from JP72]

- 01 J43 : Well, as for the application of your study, how to use your research results, I am talking about. Well, this is my
 02 third conversation recording today. I major in technology. I found that the other participants study
 03 communications and so on.
 04 J38 : [@@@1]
 05 J43 : [linguistics1] something like that they always talked about that
 06 J38 : [yeah 2]
 07 J33 : [yes 2]
 08 J43 : well uh I don't mean it, I am not insulting you.
 09 J33 : yeah
 10 J43 : I'm just asking out of curiosity. Well, what should I say? In the field of technology
 11 J43 : when you'll discover this, then you'll improve this part, you'll make new technology or something, very very
 direct [toward1]
 13 J33 : [yeah、 yeah direct 1]
 14 J43 : direct, we have merit or something, we know what this experiment will be useful for, but
 15 J38 : yes
 16 J43 : yeah, well, what should I say, I am afraid this might sound very impolite, are the people who study
 17 communication and language really enjoying their research? I don't know much about their research field.
 18 J33 : yes
 19 J43 : for that, what should I say, what motivates them to do their current research?
 20 J33 : mm
 21 J38 : yeah yeah
 22 J43 : I have been thinking about it during the conversation recording today.
 23 J33 : yes
 24 J38 : yes
 25 J33 : [well 1]
 26 J43 : [for example, as for communication 1] I cannot see why and how they are studying it.
 27 J38 : yes
 28 J43 : In which part of the world would they apply their research results? I am curious to know why they do so.
 39 J38 : yes
 30 J43 : Just from my curiosity though1

In excerpts (9) through (11), the asker creates some minor conversation breakdowns because he did not use any hedges or pre-sequences prior to his questions. In (9), J37 asked J42 how he pays his school fees. This is a very personal

and private topic in Japan. J42 shows his astonishment at the question by saying ‘Ha?’ in a loud voice. According to Maynard and Zimmerman (1984), “uh” indicates dismay, showing that the question is problematic. In line 4, J42 uses a grammatically unfinished sentence. This implies that he did not want to talk about it. However, in line 5, J37 uses the short continuer ‘aa,’ showing that he is waiting for the answer. Thus, J42 starts to talk about it. However, he is still showing that he does not want to talk about it, and said that he does not remember in line 6.

(9) [Excerpt from JP68] (literal translation)

01 J37 : Well, how about your school fees? (=How do you make money to pay for your school fees?)

02 J42 : Ha? [School fee 1]

03 J37 : [School fee] Did you get a scholarship?

04 J42 : Well, I failed twice...

05 J37 : aa

06 J42 : well, school fee, well, (.) What did I do? I kind of forget. I cannot remember. Well, the Student Service Organization

07 J37 : aa

08 J43 : aa yes, yes

09 J42 : I got some from it. The university has a foundation for Ph.D. students. I applied for it. I earned some. Also, I work 10 as a part-time teacher.

11 J37 : aa

12 J43 : hun

In (10), J38 is asking why J43 chose to study at his university in line 3. This is also a personal question that requires J43’s ideas and opinions. J43 is a student at one of the top-ranked universities in Japan. First, in line 1, J38 shifts the topic to the university. This experimental conversation was recorded at J43’s university. J38 did not use hedges but he used a grammatically unfinished question with a short pause. Unfinished questions sound less imposing. However, when J43 is asked this question, he reacts by saying, “wow” to indicate his dismay at the question, mumbles, and tries to avoid answering by saying “I don’t remember.” However, after a short pause, he starts to talk about why he selected his university to study programming.

(10) [Excerpt from JP72] (literal translation)

01 J38 : You entered university. I guess this is your school, am I right?

02 J43 : Yes=

03 J38 : = You chose this university. (.) What process did...?

04 J43 : That, wow, that, that, I do not remember well. (.) Well, I am in the area of information systems

05 now. Well, my first motivation was probably, I wanted to study programming, something like

06 that

07 J38 : un

In both excerpts (9) and (10), first, the question recipients’ dismay is shown. However, this was a conversation between unacquainted people trying to avoid creating conflict or an uncomfortable atmosphere. Thus, later they answered the question politely, even if they did show hesitation at first.

Excerpt (11) is not an example of a wh-question. This excerpt serves as an example of when the question recipient strongly refused to answer the question but still behaved politely. All the participants, J36, J37, and J39, were enrolled in M.A. courses at different universities. One of them, J39, asked J37 about his plans to enroll in a Ph.D. course. J37 did not answer the question. After a very short pause, which might show hesitation, he says “what should I do?” in line 2. Before he started answering by saying, “well,” another participant, J36, started to laugh in line 3. He may have felt that it was an inappropriate question because it was too personal. J39 realized that he asked an inappropriate question, so he mimicked J37’s utterance of “what should I do?” and laughed to mitigate the tentative breakdown shown in line 4. This shows that he did not want to answer the question he was asked. J37 laughed too. After a very short period, J36 also mimicked the answer of “what should I do?” showing that he did not want to answer that question. All three agreed in a comical way. J37 understood that they shared the same feeling and his statement of “That may be the answer” in line 6 shows his

understanding that no one wanted to answer the question.

(11) [Excerpt from JP71]

01 J39: Have you decided to do a Ph.D. course?

(0.5)

02 J37 'What should I do?' Well. ...

03 J36 [laughing]

04 J39 'What should I do?' [laughing]

05 J37 [laughing]

(.)

06 J36 '[laughing] What should I do?'

07 J37 That may be the answer.

5. Conclusion

This study examined typical wh-questions in the experimental conversation data of the first meeting of three Japanese males. It was found that wh-questions used for clarification that are not related to personal topics are acceptable. However, when asking about personal matters with wh-questions, some hedge words are required to lessen the imposition on the question recipient, either pre-sequence or post-sequence. Pre-sequence and post-sequence hedge words should contain the reason for asking or an apology for the impolite behavior of asking personal questions. It can be said that for Japanese speakers, a priority is placed on politeness. The Japanese speakers in this study tried to avoid imposition, which was created by asking personal questions. Therefore, when asking, they needed some approaching time with hesitation and excuses. They chose forms which were not heard as questions and forms with less imposition. They also tried to avoid asking inappropriate questions. Inappropriate questions included the questions that the asker assumed the question recipients would feel uncomfortable answering and to which their answer would be "no." Moreover, they tried to avoid questions that question recipients feel difficulty to answer. In addition, Japanese participants try to avoid conflict. They even avoid questions that the expected answer will be "no." In order to prevent this, they used pre-sequences and post sequences with hedges and excuses instead of asking the question recipient directly.

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Appendix

Transcribing symbols

Symbol	Gloss
(.)	A short pause. Usually less than one second.
@	laughing
[n]	overlap/simultaneous speech: n=number of overlaps in the extract
↑	rising intonation
...	grammatically unfinished sentence
XXX	pseudo name